The American Threat to America in the Gulf

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For all the warnings about Iranian retaliation and revenge, the real threat to American interests in the Gulf may well be America itself. Unless Iran grossly overreacts to the killing of Soleimani, the U.S. may either have to withdraw from Iraq and see it become part of Iran’s sphere of influence, or see it become even more divided as a country and see most of Iraq be dominated by Iran. If this happens, and if the U.S. ceases to be the main source of military assistance to Iraq’s regular military forces, the U.S. will lose its last real source of influence over Iraq and its most important current strategic objective in the Gulf.

The last week has seen the United States do an amazing job of undermining its interests in Iraq and in the region. First, the U.S. failed to pay any serious attention to Iraqi concerns over its sovereignty in launching attacks on the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and in killing Soleimani. It seems to have made its decisions in Washington without any serious examination of how its actions would affect Iraqi politics at a time when Iraq is even more divided than usual and has no real government beyond a weak caretaker regime.

Second, even before killing Soleimani, the U.S. reacted to the demonstrations and attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad by reducing its remaining personnel to a dysfunctional level and advising all other American civilians to leave the country – potentially crippling key petroleum and other economic development activities at a time when the Iraq economy is in near collapse.

Third, it has now reacted to the Iraqi debate over whether U.S. forces should be allowed to stay in Iraq by threatening to further undermine a crippled Iraqi economy by sanctioning it and by trying to charge Iraq billions of dollars for the main airbase the U.S. uses in Iraq – although U.S. bases in Iraq are the product of the U.S. campaign against ISIS and the past history of U.S. military occupation, and Iraq still lacks a meaningful air force of its own.

Piling New Failures in Iraq upon Past Failures

Moreover, this new series of critical failures in U.S. policy builds on a long history of other U.S. failures in Iraq. They began with the failure to have any meaningful plan for what would happen in Iraq after the fall of Saddam in 2003. From 2004 on, this led to the creation of a failed structure for Iraqi governance, failed civil nation-building programs, and then to having U.S. forces leave in 2011 while the creation of effective Iraqi security forces was a half-finished job at best.

The end result was a divided country that lacked the ability to defend itself even against the negligible forces ISIS initially invaded with and another massive fight against an extremist enemy while desperately trying to again rebuild Iraq forces. From roughly 2013 through the end of 2018, the U.S. engaged in its third round of war in Iraq since 2003 – this time to break up the ISIS caliphate.

Once it returned to Iraq, the U.S. did again try to build a serious Iraqi Army and Air Force that could serve Iraq’s interests. However, few Iraqis realized the extent to which these efforts served Iraq’s own national interests The U.S. publicly focused almost exclusively on ISIS. It made only minimal efforts to show Iraqis it was acting in their interests. It failed to conduct an effective strategic communications campaign to highlight the value of U.S. air strikes and train and assist missions or show that it had any long-term plan to create Iraq forces that could stabilize Iraq and defend against Iran and other outside powers.
The U.S. did not properly publicize its emergency humanitarian aid and made no real effort to help Iraq meet its crippling economic challenges and develop. It effectively cooperated with the same PMF it has now attacked, it cut its diplomatic presence to critically low levels, and began to talk about U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the Gulf – starting the strange cycle of almost weekly reversals as to whether the U.S. building its force up or building them down.

At present, the U.S. almost seems dedicated to losing the most important single option it has in containing Iran and stabilizing the Gulf. In fact, killing Soleimani may have given him and Iran his greatest victory.

**Failure in the Region as Well as in Iraq**

Iraq, however, is only the current pivot in a broader series of American failures. At least to date, the main result of the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran has been to weaken and alienate the more moderate forces in Iran, drive Iran back toward missiles and an active nuclear weapons program, and push it toward exploiting gray area operations in all of the many self-destructive fault lines in the Arab world.

The recent U.S. threats to conduct a massive series of 52 strikes against sites in Iran have done far more to unify Iranians around the hardliners in its regime than anything else, and the almost casual threats to attack Iran’s cultural treasures coming out of the White House have done much to validate Iran’s charges of American aggressiveness – and even led to charges that the U.S. is planning war crimes. They also have reinforced the impression that the U.S. could again go to war in Iran in the same way it went to war when it toppled Saddam Hussein – without any plan for what happens even it wins and without any clear alternative to war that might attract the support of Iran’s people.

At the same time, all of these events have taken place in a Middle East where the U.S. has effectively lost Syria, seen Lebanon steadily deteriorate, stood by as the Arab Gulf states turn on each other, and watched Yemen become a new major theater of Iranian influence. Moreover, the U.S. has seen NATO halt its operations against ISIS, seen its European allies fail to support the U.S. strikes and threats against Iran, and given Russia, China, and Turkey new leverage in interfering in the region.

The one saving grace in this Gulf-wide mess has been the role that USCENTCOM and U.S. military forces, advisors, and commands play in working with Arab strategic partners in the Gulf. They have offered some degree of stability, but even their role is uncertain as the U.S. swings wildly from threats to withdraw from the region to crisis-driven build-ups and shifts in the role of U.S. forces.

Moreover, the U.S. pressure to sell arms rather than create effective military partners – and to turn alliances into efforts at burden-sharing blackmail has scarcely helped. Greed is a poor substitute for partnership – particularly when many of the Arab Gulf states concerned are spending nearly three times the percentage of their GDP on military forces that the U.S. does, and all are spending at least three times the 2% the U.S. is asking of its NATO partners.

Put bluntly, the U.S. does have all too real enemies and Iran is clearly one of them. If the U.S. is to succeed in the Gulf, however, it must also address the enemy it sees when it looks in the mirror.

*Other more detailed studies examining U.S. strategy and policy in Iraq, and Iraqi instability, include:*